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Autonomy, Negotiation and Collaboration: Student Participation in Curriculum Development: The Development of an On-line Learning Lexicon for Fashion and Textiles Students

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Abstract: This study presents a novel approach in the exercise of autonomy where students were asked to participate in redesigning a course curriculum and materials to suit their personal and professional language needs. In addition, a new learning resource was created tailored to their specific needs. Following an institution-wide restructuring of courses, a new professional English training subject was developed in response to textiles and clothing industry needs, and discussions with teaching staff. Although the content was highly subject-specific and the assessments designed to reflect relevant practices in the industry, students and teachers felt after the first offer of the course, that there was a need to further develop some of the new ideas introduced. A selected group of students interviewed their classmates to identify the changes that they deemed necessary, and to solicit specific ideas for language activities. The information collected by these students was further negotiated with course developers and technical assistants. This paper records the students' achievements in exercising their skills of negotiation and collaboration with their fellow classmates, course developers, and assistants in order to bring a change to the design and materials of the course. The paper draws on data collected through student and staff interviews to investigate the mutual benefits to be reaped from this synergistic relationship in terms of developing materials, as well as students' awareness of how engagement in negotiation and collaboration can lead to increased autonomy in making decisions regarding the course curriculum and materials. Finally, it details the creation of a new learning resource for fashion and textiles students.

Keywords: Curriculum Design, Learner Created Materials, Learners as Researchers, Online Image Database for Fashion

Introduction

THE ECONOMIC DOWNTURN in the late 1990s resulted in a decreased number of credits required by students to be completed in order to graduate from The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU). Since 2004, required credits have fallen from one hundred and nine credits, to ninety. This was closely linked to staff cuts and the reduction of other expenses. A language centre providing English Language Courses to students from all faculties, the English Language Centre (ELC) was required to sell itself and its courses to individual departments. This required the ELC to almost entirely re-invent the courses on offer. Departments required varying levels, types, and duration of language

courses for their students. Most wanted highly specific subject input to give their students a head start on joining the industry. For various reasons some departments decided that their students did not need English courses at all. For example: they now had a smarter intake, the eventual professional career did not require a high proficiency in English, or a requirement to major in English subjects.

The English Language Centre proposed courses for all six faculties in the PolyU and sometimes for each department. Faculty Coordinators for English Subjects at the English Language Centre met with programme and subject leaders from departments and created a course plan after in-depth negotiation. Faculty Coordinators asked the departments to document perceived writing and oral needs, texts and sample data, and scenarios for the ELC to consider when developing courses. The ELC approached academics, and contacted people from the various industries students intended to join in the near future to determine English Language needs and to incorporate their ideas into the courses.

The course examined in this paper (Workplace English for Institute of Textile and Clothing Students), was developed as above, and the content of the course based on recommendations from the parent department and professionals from the textiles and clothing Industry. These include: making and receiving telephone calls; arranging meetings and the delivery of goods; using a wide and highly specific fashion and textile vocabulary, much of which was difficult to pronounce; writing follow-up emails; responding to enquiries via email and occasionally letters; and giving tours of factories or other manufacturing facilities to overseas visitors.

However, after the first offer, problems surfaced: ELC teachers protested that the course was technically difficult as it was heavily based on subject specific terminology. The content required them to have specialist knowledge of the field in order to teach with confidence. Nor were they confident about their ability to pronounce words such as 'godet' and 'cerise'. Many terms were not English but frequently came from European and Asian languages (Bandeau, cheongsam). The design of the activities, the difficulty in providing students with a clear structure of written fashion trend reports and a manageable amount of new technical terms, together with students' inability to internalize vocabulary in a short period of time and the ability to offer realistic contexts for new words were problematic.

Revision was required, but how? The course already featured an in-depth investigation in terms of content and skills required, and it was believed necessary to involve student learners and teachers in participating in the redesign of course materials. Since 2005, proposals to develop pilot projects for teaching and learning have been expected to focus on learners. A proposal was submitted to the Learning and Teaching Grants Committee at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University's Educational Development Centre to examine the course together with the students and teachers to redesign the materials, write new activities and develop an efficient support system for vocabulary. The proposal to revisit the course was awarded a competitive grant for Pilot Work on Innovative Approaches to Teaching and Learning. Students were engaged as equal participants in redesigning the course materials and re-writing activities. This was completed in close collaboration with fellow classmates, teachers, and technical staff.

This paper investigates the extent to which students were able to exercise their skills of negotiation and collaboration with their fellow classmates, the personnel required in order to bring a change to the design and materials of the course, and the development of a visual lexicon. The department drew on data collected through student and staff interviews investigating the mutual benefits to be reaped from this synergistic relationship in terms of devel-

oping materials, as well as students' awareness of how engagement in negotiation and collaboration could lead to increased autonomy in making decisions regarding course curriculum and materials.

Underlying Principles

Curriculum development must incorporate the world our learners inhabit, their experiences and their interpretation of the knowledge that they not only acquire but create through interacting with the existing principles and theories, and re-interpretation and application of these in reality. As language educators, when in designing curricula and teaching materials it is necessary to carefully consider the manner in which learners interpret and make connections with their own world. Language teaching curricula should be sensitive to learners from different backgrounds and disciplines who are required to make sense of the material with which they are required to work, matching their level of understanding not only in terms of the content, but also technical relevance. It is important that learners learn in an environment mixing the familiar and new in order to maximize their learning. A curriculum that encourages engagement is described by van Lier (van Lier: 1998: 214), as based on foundational principles that clarify knowledge. He propounds that this approach treats language curriculum as theory of practice where practice is an integration of theory of learning, pedagogical interaction and instruction. Learning, then, is jointly constructed by all participants in a collaborative process (van Lier: 1998: 214). Language education is enhanced by learner engagement, intrinsic motivation and self determination. In order to provide an atmosphere where learners feel at most capable, social scaffolding is required:

Language Education is enhanced by such things as engagement, intrinsic motivation and self determination. These conditions are promoted by certain kinds of social interaction. (Van Lier & Matsuo: 2000: 265-287)

Tapping into the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) of learners is an essential goal of a curriculum, and therefore students were engaged in the decision-making process in creating their own curriculum (Bruner: 1983: 60, van Lier: 1996: 214, Vygotsky: 1978: 87). Using a negotiated syllabus, Nunan found learners' engagement in activities and interaction elicited their experiences in creating a course to be an essential element in motivating learners and meeting their developing needs with the teacher being the prime agent of syllabus change (Nunan: 1988: 13). Realigning the curriculum engaged learners, and helping learners to utilise the resources they need to work in their ZPD included:

- Assistance from more capable peers or adults: students working on the project achieved this through interaction with the Project Leader, participating language teachers, and working closely with technical staff.
- Interaction with equal peers: participant students worked with classmates and project students as team members.
- Interaction with less capable peers (we learn by teaching): from the perspective of the 'knowhow,' students engaged in curriculum development reported a more exalted status in comparison to other classmates who were not part of the team. The engaged students interacted with non-participants with confidence and authority that came from their employment on the project.

- Inner resources: students working on the project were majoring in fashion and textiles related disciplines and so brought their existing knowledge and resources to the course. These contributions validated their presence on the project team as crucial and indispensable.
- From Bruner: 1983: 60, van Lier: 1996: 214, Vygotsky: 1978: 87.

Autonomy defines human achievement: if learners feel trapped or obliged to learn materials with which they disagree, dislike, or misunderstand, they may not be able to learn or apply learning. Any such learning may be superficial or short term, undertaken to pass exams or the course. Autonomy enables learners to select appropriate action, to take responsibility for their learning, and to feel a sense of accomplishment when a project in which they were significant drivers is completed. Curriculum for language learning, therefore, should be based on the principles that incorporate interaction with learners and include their suggestions and ideas in designing materials that will affect their learning. Mindful of this perspective, the curriculum and the materials to deliver the curriculum should therefore incorporate ideals in granting learners preference in learning methods. The centrality of interaction in learning is noted by van Lier: the "...central determining factors of our curriculum (should be) our basic educational principles, ideals and beliefs, coupled with practical actions which most clearly promote learning." (van Lier: 1996: 188).

Project Design

To engage learners in reflecting on their own curriculum and materials in order to re-align these with their perceptions and needs, an email inviting applications for project assistants was sent to Year One and Two Institute of Textiles and Clothing (ITC) students who had taken the initial Workplace English course. Completion of the course was a pre-requisite in order to allow learners to approach their classmates for feedback. Given that the learners who had taken the course did not need to take it again, the response rate was reasonable. The interview process was conducted in a manner which prepared students for future job interviews. Of the applications received, 25 students were interviewed, and 12 were appointed. 1 later resigned for personal reasons and 1 departed for a work placement in a company in China. The remaining students were offered aspects of the project according to the strengths identified during their interviews. The job description for participating students included: collection of feedback from classmates through interviews and questionnaires; analysis of feedback; brainstorming new activities; drawing; photography; web-development; and collecting swatches from the local textiles market. Students were required to communicate with team members on a regular basis through meetings and email. This was crucial as timely input from various teams was essential for completion of the project. Images were required for the database, however, these had to be vetted and approved for accuracy, quality, format, and most importantly, copyright infringements. The images were either photographed or sketched.

A team of 6 students collected feedback from classmates, summarising it for the project team. It was then analysed and suggestions incorporated into the re-designed materials. Students working with the technical team were responsible for designing the database online, reordering the fashion vocabulary so that it could be logically arranged online, and formatting and converting images to suit web-delivery and other technical processes.

Findings

The following section details the project deliverables. An image and vocabulary online database with interactive activities for online/self-access learning was developed. Students' help was elicited in developing a database of images representing the vocabulary in the course syllabus, further improvement of the existing ITC website, and integrating the online materials with the other course materials. Access to the self-learning database allowed students flexibility in working at their own pace according to their individual needs.

The website and the online databank developed by the students to supplement the course materials included an updated vocabulary list, revised and rewritten with their involvement. This included names of garments, garment parts, fabrics, construction techniques, and designers. Users were then able to access the databank outside class, and to use the online support system as an enquiry tool for language learning and preparation of assessed and non-assessed assignments and activities throughout the course, both inside and outside the classroom.

Students revised the course book based on student and teacher input, evaluation, and feedback, and rewriting learning activities as required. This assisted students in developing their professional English repertoire of terms and structures. The benefit was mutual as students contributed their discipline-related knowledge to the materials. Learning activities were therefore developed that were student-centred and student-created, linguistically sound, and professionally viable. 2 part-time students working full-time in the fashion and textiles industry were hired in order to include practical ideas and first-hand knowledge of the profession in the course. These part-time students were able to contribute images, email texts, and forms used as part of their daily work routine. Full-time students, who had no experience of the fashion and textile industry, were able to clarify concepts that they were studying and obtain information from those working in the field before redesigning activities.

Through collaboration and the natural and motivating scaffolding created for students allowed them to work in their ZPD, an outcome as important as the project deliverables. Students were asked why they participated. Most valued the opportunity to practice their English (both orally and in writing):

'I have more chance to practice my English as I seldom use English. I think this is a good chance for me to communicate with different kinds of people. I enjoyed it very much.' (R., Interview: 29/09/2008)

And:

'Before I joined this project I was working in the merchandising field. I think this experience is useful for me to apply on my job in [the] garment merchandising field, working as assistant merchandiser'. (R., Interview: 29/09/2008)

Students were asked if working on the project assisted them in their professional domain. Students clearly identified the benefits:

'The vocabulary: - even though I am still not sure how to spell words like 'bishop' - some of the words are more familiar. When we were on the course, we had gone through

the words already, but I had forgotten them. After working on this project, now, I can remember some of them. It's better than before.' (P., Interview: 29/09/2008)

As language professionals, engagement is a principle in cultivating student participation in interesting and realistic projects. Confirmation was sought from participating students who were asked if it was a good idea to involve students in similar future projects: 'It is a good idea to engage students in these kinds of projects because they understand the course better, and also they can understand their work. I think it is good to employ students to work on this project.' (R., Interview: 29/09/2008) Participating students were generally positive about participation and confirmed the project investigators' initial objectives in engaging them. The teaching staff who participated in the project also reflected on the potential benefits for learners.

'I think this is a good way of getting students involved in their own learning and increase their learning interests ... another benefit of such an approach is that the materials developed are likely to be more relevant and interesting as they are created from a user's perspective.' (A., e-mail: 16/01/2009)

And:

'It's good because students can [benefit from a] real working element. Students can learn to work independently, learn to communicate with other team members, and can learn to respect reality.' (B., Interview: 16/01/2009)

As professional academics, who tend to be critical and evaluative by nature, teaching staff expressed their reservations regarding student participation in similar projects. These may be of use to future investigators:

'...our students are First Year student s in their very first semester. Many of them have no idea what they need in English in relation to their own studies / work. Their feedback may be rather general with little impact on learning. I think student feedback is only useful when students have a clear understanding of their own needs and know what they want in English.' (A., e-mail: 16/01/2009)

In order to prevent the materials from becoming completely student driven, both language teachers and professionals from the industry continually monitored, modified, and fine-tuned the materials. A number of images and photographs for the database gathered by students lacked quality, skill in drawing, or were sometimes images protected by copyright law. Hong Kong copyright law precludes the use of previously published images: therefore it was necessary to source be-spoke images and photographs for this project. There are several written fabric dictionaries in print: The Anstey Weston guide (Anstey & Weston: 1997) is an extremely good example but, like many such dictionaries, comprehension requires a prior knowledge of textiles terms in order to be able to understand a description. There is also a visual dictionary (Ambrose & Harris: 2007), which is more helpful for students but is generalized and not Asia-specific. The web itself is an excellent source of descriptions, definitions, and examples with images. However, these are scattered: they require persistence and reasonable surfing skills to locate, and are sometimes conflicting. For example, a search for

'flamenco dress' produces images of inexpensive dresses on a Mallorca market stall, and tailored dresses for Spanish dance enthusiasts in California: the dresses are sleeveless, or have long sleeves with a ruffle at the wrist, or ruffles around the armhole. Nevertheless, all have rows of asymmetrical ruffles around the hem - an illustration makes this far clearer than a written description.

It is impossible to convey in words the fine quality of some garments and accessories. For example, to distinguish between a 'Kiss-me-quick' straw hat purchased for seaside wear, and a finely woven Panama hat made of the leaves of the toquilla straw plant in Ecuador, for use with a jacket when strolling around a city in good weather, sounds minimal in words but reveals a significant difference in appearance and meaning. It is impossible to accurately draw some things: a mesh-fabric lining inside a high-tech fabric waterproof coat can be described, but the appearance of the fabric can only be imagined as it is not possible to render this realistically, but only as a stylized concept. Here a photograph makes the appearance of the coated outer and the lining fabric apparent. In creating a be-spoke lexicon, Asian-specific dress, including the cheongsam, the ao-dai, and others, can also be included. The dictionary is also useful in determining colours. In Cantonese description of colour is limited: red, yellow, blue, and so on. Even pink is described as 'light-red.' Whilst Pantone reference numbers can be used, many Western fashion customers and fashion trend reports use descriptive language to impart a seasonal mood to the colour palette. To distinguish between daffodil yellow, primrose yellow, and sunflower yellow is important. Whilst these flowers are all available in Hong Kong, students are unlikely to know their English names and may not have practice in distinguishing colours.

As some illustrations had already been completed by the students, and mindful that further contributions to the lexicon may not be created by the same people if it is extended in the future, it was clear that no one style of illustration would be appropriate. It was therefore agreed that the illustrations would be in different styles. Whilst all illustrations were intended to be as clear as possible, styles varied from the naïve fine-artist Beryl Cook (see website reference), to the famous fashion illustrator Rene Gruau (see website reference). By using different styles it was intended that the illustrations act as an advent calendar does: provoking curiosity and anticipation in opening the next window in the countdown to Christmas Day. Similarly, the promise of a different style of illustration at the next click, was intended to encourage the students to check a further definition to see what the illustration looked like and so increase his or her knowledge.

Hong Kong is well endowed with top-end designer stores, and fashion and textiles students are generally able to recognize merchandise from top-end labels. However, the local practice of giving designer brands a local name (Chanel is 'Channel' for example), and failing to pronounce others at all (this includes Salvatore Ferragamo) does little to help students' confidence. The website allows the students to hear and to be able to practice repeating a designer's name. It also allows names that they may not know but should know, to be introduced. The clarity of the description was edited to be unambiguous, mindful of the vocabulary of an average student. Entries were particularly checked to ensure that they did not require recourse to a dictionary in order to understand them - a frustratingly common experience of dictionary use. An additional description or an example was given where appropriate in order to clarify and contextualize the garment.

In total approximately one hundred and fifty illustrations were completed. The opportunity was taken to add additional entries that, from one of the author's fashion lecturing experience,

were those with which students had difficulty. Examples include the distinction between a parka and an anorak – both jackets with a fur-edged hood.

Conclusions

The project achieved its two pronged outcomes: learner collaboration in decision making process regarding their syllabus, negotiating aspects of materials design, evaluation of existing materials, and development of materials that reflected the linguistic and discipline-specific aspects together. The collaboratively re-designed course book features activities that are both visual and language-based, contextualized within the subject-specific content. The lexicon created forms a useful adjunct to the resources of the English Language Learning Centre as well as a resource for students. If it continues to be updated and extended it may also, in future, provide for an additional resource for industry professionals. In addition, the project makes a case for including learners in the decision-making process while designing curricula and realizing syllabi for profession-related language teaching.

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- Fashion Lexicon: http://158.132.164.185/ITC_lexicon/main2.aspx
- Appendices are available on request.

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Dureshahwar is an ELT professional with a Masters Degree in English Literature from The Department of English, The University of Peshawar, Pakistan and a second MA in Linguistics and English Language Teaching from The Department of Linguistics and Phonetics, The University of Leeds, UK. With a teaching and research career spanning tertiary education in Pakistan and Hong Kong, Dureshahwar has engaged in several action research projects related to teaching and learning of English and curriculum development. Dureshahwar has led teams of materials writers and co-written and published a range of English language textbooks for applied sciences, financial management, and fashion and textile students. Dureshahwar also conducts personal development training workshops with specific focus on persuasive presentations for business executives and marketing and management students. Dureshahwar has been awarded excellence of performance award by the Faculty Dean of Faculty of Communication (now Faculty of Humanities) for her role as the founder of the PolyU International Film Society at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, which became a trail blazer in cultivating a stimulating cultural environment in the University and encouraging a host of similar organizations in its wake.

Dr. Valerie Wilson Trower

An international fashion professional with a background in design, retailing and marketing, originally from the U.K., Valerie has lived and worked in Asia for more than eleven years running her own consultancy and lecturing in Visual Merchandising and Fashion Design for major academic institutions. Past clients include MTR, Shanghai Tang and The Diamond Trading Company. Having recently completed her doctorate, registered at The London College of Fashion, The University of the Arts, London, Valerie lectures in Design History specializing in fashion, and has spoken widely: her research and publications include work on Hong Kong's contemporary expatriate Western community, and visual merchandising. Valerie has also had three short stories published and recently won a short story competition.